

Haym Solomon: The Man Behind the Myth of the Dollar's Star of David

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According to lore, **Haym Solomon's** greatest gift to the American Jewish community is found tucked in most people's wallets. Atop the eagle on the back of the one dollar bill is a field of thirteen stars arranged in the shape of a Star of David.

The Numismatic Bibliomania Society recounts one version how the Jewish symbol came to be found on the dollar note. "This was ordered by **George Washington** who, when he asked Haym Solomon, a wealthy Philadelphia Jew, what he would like as a personal reward for his services to the Continental Army Solomon said he wanted nothing for himself, but he would like something for his people," the story claims. "The Star of David was the result."

Unfortunately, Numismatic Bibliomania Society's **Wayne Homren** insists that Solomon's selfless nod to the Jewish people is "an interesting story, but most likely a tall tale." The currency expert points out that America's first President, in fact, had little to do with design of the first dollar, making his supposed financial advisor's clandestine nod to the Jewish people unlikely.

Schmooze writer **Benjamin Goldberg** further debunks the Solomon myth. "Unfortunately for lovers of National Treasure-style conspiracy theories, there is no evidence that this story occurred," he said. "While the stars are in fact arranged in a hexagram [the geometric name of the Star of David], the official State Department document describing the history of the seal makes no mention of any Jewish symbolism."

Yet, despite the fact Solomon is unlikely to have left a Jewish mark on the one dollar bill, there is little doubt the Revolutionary era Jewish hero's colorful and legendary life has woven itself into the fabric of American Jewish storytelling and cultural pride. While many of the details of the patriot's life have been disputed, historian **Beth Wenger** claims, "Haym Solomon became an object lesson in Jewish patriotism as well as a model case in the formation of American Jewish heritage."

The Arrest and Escape of Haym Solomon

Very little is known for certain about the early life of Solomon, whose name is spelled differently depending on the account. He is believed to have been born in Poland in 1740 and arrived in New York in his early 30's. Once in his adopted homeland, he married **Rachel Franks**, a girl from the poorer ranks of the powerful Franks family, and began a business involving Dutch and English notes. The exact details of his business are unknown, and he has been called a merchant, broker, distiller and banker. He is also said to have become involved with the Sons of Liberty and branded an outlaw and spy in British New York.

An 1884 copy of “History of Philadelphia” recounts the story of Solomon’s arrest by the British in New York and his subsequent narrow escape. “Haym Solomon, a broker and a banker, a native of Poland, was a remarkable man. Being in New York when the British took that city, he was locked for weeks in the loathsome dungeon called the ‘Prevot’ but escaping came to Philadelphia.”

Jane Amler writes that the conditions of the Provost prison were so crowded at the time of Solomon’s arrest that when the men slept on the wooden boards, “they all had to turn at the same time.” She also reports, “Salomon [sic] ate his moldy bread and drank the thin soups and foul water that were offered.”

A historian for the Sons of American Revolution, **Daniel Moran**, asserts that Solomon, knowledgeable in German, French and other European languages, used his polyglot capabilities to win favor with the Hessian guards and joined a secret prison espionage ring where “Salomon [sic] was responsible for encouraging more than 500 Hessian soldiers to desert to the American side!”

In another version, **Walter A. McDougall** states Solomon was “twice arrested for espionage” but after his escape was “free to resume his brilliant merchantile career in Philadelphia.” Still another telling found in **Madison Peter’s** 1911 biography of Solomon insists upon his second arrest, “He was imprisoned, tortured and condemned to a military death but on August 11, 1788, he managed to escape, by bribing a jailor, leaving behind six pounds sterling, a distressed wife and a child one month old.”



‘Send for Haym Solomon’

By all accounts, Solomon arrived, without wife and child, in Philadelphia by 1778. It was there in the fervor of the growing American Revolution that he would leave his greatest mark on American history.

Shortly after arriving in Philadelphia, Solomon garnered the attention of **Robert Morris**, the superintendent of Finance for the Continental Congress and director of Congressional policies. Solomon, who had earned a good financial reputation working for the French, was recruited to sell war bonds. There is little dispute Solomon excelled at this task and Morris reportedly claimed Solomon was “the most successful of all war brokers.”

Solomon also provided personal funds in the forms of loans to the cause, an act at least one source links to his piety. “Under the laws of Moses funds to the needy were to be provided without interest,” **W. Cleon Skousken** writes. “This was the policy of Haym Solomon in his effort to support the cause of the Revolution.”

But evidence suggests that Solomon’s agreement with Morris was more business minded. In his diary entry from September 17, 1781, Morris wrote, “I agreed with Mr. Haym Solomon... to assist me in the bills I am to draw for the monies aforesaid, his brokerage to be settled hereafter but not to exceed one half percent.”

Surviving documents also show Solomon charged variable interest rates for his loans, which he provided to some of the revolution’s most notable, including **James Madison**. “I have for some time,” the founding father wrote, “been a pensioner on the favour of Haym Salomon, a Jew Broker.” But whatever the interest rate charged, few of these notes were ever repaid.

From the period of 1781-1784, records show Solomon financial skills and personal lending helped provide over \$650,000 financing to the war effort notes. His biggest financial contribution to the war, however, came in the last battle.

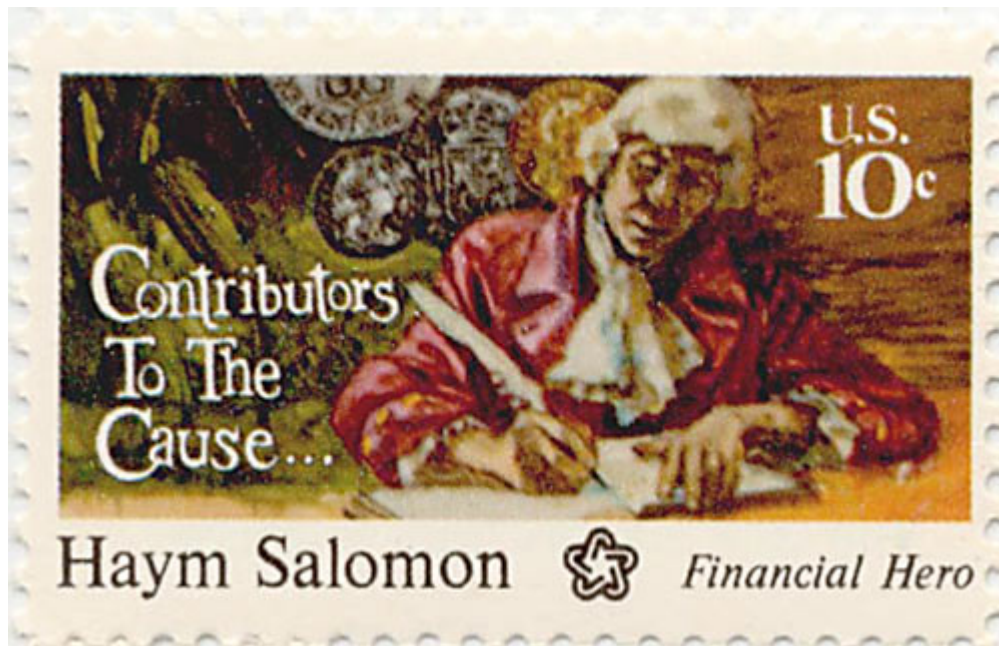
With the battle of Yorktown in full force, the revolutionary fighters had run out of cash. Without food, uniforms and supplies, George Washington’s troops were close to mutiny. Lacking credit or hard cash, Washington reached out to Robert Morris, who advised him of the effort’s dire financial straits. “Send for Haym Solomon,” Washington demanded.

While evidence is scant that Washington actually uttered this phrase, it seems almost certain that Solomon played a heavy role in securing the \$20,000 in funding Washington needed to keep fighting. Scholar **Jacob Marcus** notes, “There is no question that Salomon was crucial year of 1781-the year which brought victory at Yorktown.”

An Untimely Death

Sadly, the war financier died suddenly and in poverty on January 8, 1785. Due to the failure of the government and his private lenders to repay the debt incurred by the war, his family was left penniless at his death at age 45.

Although founding member of Mikveh Israel synagogue in Philadelphia, whose opening announcement was penned with his own hand, the once celebrated citizen was buried in an unmarked grave. The obituary from the Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser simply read, “On Thursday, died Haym Salomon, a broker.”



The Importance of the Myth of Haym Solomon

Despite his inauspicious death, the myth of Haym Solomon as the greatest financier of the American Revolution took root in American Jewish culture. Over the years, the legends of Solomon grew. Soon, stories emerged that Solomon singlehandedly financed the entire war effort, was able to unite Jewish practice and patriotism flawlessly in his heroic efforts to save a budding nation, and loved both his country and the Jewish people so selflessly that his only desire for repayment was that Judaism was honored on one of the most American symbols—the dollar bill.

Dr. **Joseph Sarna**, professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, explains the reason for this myth making. “Since very few Jews actually have Revolutionary roots in the US, the story of Haym Salomon [sic] helped to legitimize Jews in this country,” he stated. “It proved that they too had played a ‘major’ role in America’s founding.”

Over time, many of the less substantiated claims of Solomon’s acts and deeds found their way even into mainstream American history accounts of the war. Quipping, “old myths never die, they just find their way into textbooks,” scholar Jacob Marcus notes the erroneous explanation on the back of the 1975 bicentennial stamp of Haym Solomon.

“Businessman and broker Haym Salomon was responsible for raising most of the money needed to finance the American Revolution,” the US Post Office-issued stamp reads, despite the lack of hard evidence to this fact.

The real Haym Solomon, even without such aggrandizing legends, still deserves an honored place in American and American Jewish History. Haym Solomon was “a man of ability, integrity and courage, devoted to the land which gave him shelter,” Marcus says of the man behind the epic myths. “He was not a great man, he was a very good American; he was a Jew in the best sense of the term.”

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